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Reminiscences of the Shakers and Shaker Collecting by Robert and Hazel Belfit

Robert Belfit, Lynn Crabtree, and Patricia Williams

Recently, while sorting through some unprocessed materials in the Special Collections at Hamilton College I was surprised to come across a nineteen-page, handwritten memoir written by a Shaker collector. The manuscript was actually an early xerox copy, made on the type of machine that used rolls of paper. The sheets were irregularly cut, and the entire work was unsigned. As I read it with increasing fascination I realized that it recorded the detailed interactions of a husband and wife who had befriended the Shakers at Hancock, Mount Lebanon, Watervliet, and eventually Canterbury and Sabbathday Lake, beginning in the 1920s. Additionally, it provided rich insight into what it was like to visit those communities at that time, and to collect antiques from their members. The narrative paralleled the Andrews' own collecting memoir *Fruits of the Shaker Tree of Life*. From internal evidence I deduced that the manuscript was likely authored by Robert Belfit, who with his wife Hazel built an impressive Shaker collection in the mid-twentieth century. I consulted with Shaker scholars, and scoured printed sources, but I was never able to discover the

Belfit's narrative in print. They had, however, shared their knowledge and collection with Marian Klamkin for her 1972 book *Hands to Work: Shaker Folk Art and Industries*.

Thanks to help from Willis Henry Auctions I contacted the Belfit's granddaughter Lynn Crabtree. Mrs. Crabtree confirmed that her grandfather had been working on a memoir before he passed away, but that he had not finished it. Mrs. Crabtree, along with her sister Patricia Williams, graciously agreed to read the narrative, as transcribed by Antonia Ambrose, and authorize its publication. Additionally, they have supplied rich contextual materials in the form of photographs taken by the Belfits, letters to the Belfits from the Shakers, and also their own reminiscences of their beloved, and much missed, grandparents. In publishing these materials we hope to offer Shaker scholars and collectors an interesting, and heretofore unavailable, account of the mid-twentieth century Shakers, along with exciting information about the early period of Shaker collecting.

— Christian Goodwillie

Memories of the Belfits by their Granddaughters

Lynn Crabtree

My grandparents were very special people. They lived in Watertown, Connecticut, in a small house on a corner lot. They loved antiques and collected everything—furniture, clocks, books, glassware, stoneware, china, stamps, coins and more. What they treasured the most was their collection of Shaker furniture and artifacts. They didn't treasure it because it was valuable monetarily, because it wasn't then. They treasured it because they had developed a friendship with many of the Shakers in several communities and they respected them, their way of life, and their quality of workmanship. When our family visited them, they took great pride in showing us their newly acquired items and would point out the details that they admired.

Grandpa was a chemist and Grandma was a homemaker. Grandpa was a quiet, gentle, thoughtful man with a twinkle in his eye. He made his own furniture polish and salad dressings. Grandma was an untrained but truly talented artist. She had a wonderful collection of art books and loved to page through them. She stenciled beautiful toleware, drew, won awards (including a gold thimble) for her crewel work, and every year created original Christmas cards by engraving wood and then printing the cards.

She also wrote poetry. She was the more lively of the two, but both were very proper in manners and demeanor.

I am sure their relationship with the Shakers was one of mutual respect. They corresponded by letter in between visits. I have a tea set that my grandmother said had been used for having tea when visiting her Shaker friends. It is purple which was my grandmother's favorite color and at some point they gave it to her.



Purple tea set given to Hazel Belfit by Shaker friends.
Photo courtesy of Nancy Carpenter.

I love going to auctions and appreciate antiques, and this interest began by going to auctions and church sales with my grandparents from a very early age. I remember my grandma telling me to “choose quickly but with a good eye!” They had many books on collecting and made informed decisions with that “good eye.”

My mom and dad had many Shaker pieces that grandma and grandpa gave them, and they inherited many pieces as well. My mom, Carmen Davis, gave talks to groups about the Shakers and their way of life. There may be only three Shakers left, but their legacy lives on, and my grandparents taught me that it is one of respect, admiration, and thankfulness. They benefited the communities around them and as well as future generations.



Robert and Hazel Belfit with the first edition of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* at the Watertown Library, Connecticut, 1968. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

Patricia Williams

As my sister described, our Grandma's excitement about art and intuitive eye were impressive. It impacted her collection of art and antiques, but also her sense of fashion. I remember taking a copy of *Vogue* magazine to her, shortly before she died at eighty-six years old, and she went through the magazine and commented on the colors and fashion styles—it amazed me because I thought of so many styles in *Vogue* as far out and sometimes outrageous, but she saw color and imagination.

Grandpa's deep interest and knowledge of history influenced his desire to understand Shaker history and life. This also encouraged him to keep informed on the current events of the day. He had very informed opinions on politics and events.

As a young girl I remember attending church sales and auctions—often in Litchfield, Connecticut. There was a procedure: Grandpa (probably due to his chemist background), would mix a concoction of tea and fruit juices, Grandma packed the hamper of sandwiches and snacks. We always

had to arrive early and put our belongings on chairs in the front row for the auction and then we would explore the church sale. When I was about seven I bid on my first auction item: an antique glass salt dish with spoons. It was the first item at the auction and Grandma told me to bid fifty cents—which I hollered out. The auctioneer said, “Sold to the young lady in the first row!” I still have that salt dish and fond memories of church sales and auctions with my grandparents.

I recall the reverence my Grandparents had for the Shakers and their commitment to their beliefs and work “Hands to work and heart to God” philosophy which is so apparent in their furniture and crafts. The Shakers opened their communities to orphans and women in need of support at a time when few options were available to care for the needy and homeless.

My strongest impressions of my grandpa and grandma are of the respect and admiration they had for the Shakers, their communities, and their furniture and crafts.

Robert Belfit’s Memoir of the Shakers

[Editorial Note: Mr. Belfit’s text is presented exactly as written; spelling, grammar, and punctuation are rendered as in the original. He was clearly intending to publish this work as notes for the illustration placement appear throughout. In most cases we have been unable to positively identify the specific piece referred to. Editorial insertions are in square brackets].

November 16, 1971.

Having in 1924 purchased our first car (Model T Ford), one of our first trips was to the Shakers at Mt. Lebanon, N.Y.

With background of many years interest in the Shakers as the lady of the house was born in Pittsfield and her husband had worked there, fortunately, we were anxious to own a Shaker Chair.

Stopping at the North Family store we were shown an early, straight chair, priced at \$12.00, which we thought was beyond our budget at the moment. But when we arrived home, and with further thought, we decided to buy that chair. So, soon again we visited the North Family Store and regretfully learned that the chair had been sold.

The Sister suggested a visit to the Second Family where Bro. William Perkins was sitting in an outdoor, double swing. In reply to our question, “Do you have chairs?” He quickly said “You don’t expect to find pairs at

the Shakers, do you?"

After better enunciation, Bro. William and Sister Lillian Barlow showed us an antique Shaker chair that started our collection of Shaker items but especially our most pleasant associations with many Shaker Sisters and Brothers at Mt. Lebanon and Watervliet in New York State; Hancock, Mass.; East Canterbury, New Hampshire; and Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

Shortly before our first visit to the 2nd Family, Mt. Lebanon, N.Y., they had lost by fire their chair and box making brick building ~~by a fire~~. This could have been a depressing situation but Brother William with the help of Sister Lillian resolved to carry on and started to get replacement machinery, etc. for use in an unused wood structure. Many friends gave them equipment; I especially remember that the Works Manager of the Pittsfield General Electric Co. was very generous.

They were soon producing by the score those exquisite oval boxes with fine fingers. Most of them had pine tops and bottoms with maple sides. Brother William experimented with mahogany for the sides and tops with pine as the base. ~~There were between about 50 of these exceptional striking boxes made.~~ However, the mahogany created problems in satisfactorily boiling and steaming for bending around their molds, so that their production was not continued. Being partial to mahogany we purchased six of them. These not only had covers but also mahogany handles. The boxes were 9¼" x 6" and They also made a limited number of boxes out of gum wood.

The thorough boiling and steaming of the then 10¼" x 7" wood for the sides was stressed by them as very important and required several hours. When the sides were properly steamed and glued on to the base, the box would be perfectly shaped. The copper brads are not found in these mahogany boxes as Bro. William and Sister Lillian said they were unnecessary.

We were firmly instructed that when a cover is put on a box, it should be so placed that the "finger" on the cover is directly over the fingers on the box proper.

The finish on the boxes was that which is known as "French Polish." It is essentially orange shellac applied in very thin coats. The first three or four coats of thinned shellac were applied with a brush. Each coat was lightly "sanded" with 0000 aluminum paper. The final coats were applied with a swab treated with a little linseed oil and the orange shellac as explained by Bro. William's letter in Zinsser's "Bulls Eye" publication.



Brother William Perkins, photographed at Mount Lebanon, New York, by the Belfits, ca. 1930. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

As soon as Bro. Wm Perkins knew that one of us was a chemist and had industrial experience with shellac, he asked where he could obtain shellac that would dry hard and not tacky. He was having trouble with tacky shellac. (Old solutions of orange shellac solutions in alcohol, slowly react with the alcohol to form esters which are non-drying and tacky.

Shellac solutions are now dated and packaged in cans withterneplate glass, which assures longer “life” than tinplate.) So, the Wm Zinser Co. was recommended, as they are direct importers of Shellac.

The connection solved his shellac problem and in 1929 he wrote to Zinssers a letter in which he stated that the shellac is applied with a “loving touch.” Plate No. shows a copy of that letter as printed in Zinssers “Bull’s Eye,” also a picture of Brother William’s wood working business card. He was a master craftsman (joiner) and sometimes carved designs in the covers of boxes as presents to the Sisters.

Mortar & Pestle

This help for Brother William with the shellac situation led to a close relationship.

With Sister Lillian Barlow (Deaconess), Sister [blank] and Brother Curtis, and Brother William directing, we often all joined in singing Shaker songs.

While no longer making any medicines, they had no further use for a mortar and pestle. See plate # The mortar is hewed out of marble while the working end of the pestle is polished granite with a handle of apple wood. All Shaker made.

In 1924 with that straight back Shaker chair in the backseat of our ~~the 1993 touring~~ Ford touring car, we stopped to visit ~~to visit~~ a couple in Pittsfield, who were long time friends and very much interested in antiques. they had for several years collected and sold some antiques out of their spacious barn. We had purchased several Hitchcock type chairs in the rough ~~for as little as 50 cents each.~~

When our friend Ted Andrews noticed our chair in the car he asked where we got it. Our answer was “at the Shakers in Mt. Lebanon” to which he replied to the effect that their furniture wasn’t early enough. The Andrews had been dealing mostly ~~Pilgrim~~ American Colonial, Queen Anne and Chippendale type antiques. However, on our next visit Mr. & Mrs. E.D. Andrews were almost daily visitors to the Hancock and Mt. Lebanon Shakers. Their researches and classicly written books on the Shakers are now historic and probably were mostly responsible for the meteoric rise in the demand and prices of anything Shaker. For some time, Ted Andrews was permitted to have a study in one of the Shaker Bldgs at Hancock.

Sister Alice Smith was extremely helpful to him at this time and until

she died at a relatively early age. We have an oval cherry table, on which we with Sister Alice, [illegible] enjoyed tea together, see picture We were able later to purchase this table when the Hancock Family was about to be closed.

We were primarily interested in acquiring antiques for our own use in the furnishing of our home. A second chair that was available was a low, early Shaker rocker that belonged to Eldress Margaret Eggleston who at this time was not active in the production programs of the Second Family. She admired our petite daughter so that she parted with the chair providing that it was to be Carmen's.



Hazel Belfit with her daughter Carmen, later Carmen Davis, the mother of Lynn Crabtree and her four siblings. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

Later Eldress Margaret sold us a small cherry table with one drawer, the top, 20" x 27", with an applied rim and delicate tapering legs. If one didn't know that this table was definitely Shaker made, it might be classified

as Hepplewhite. See Plate.

Desiring to have Shaker dining room chairs, we purchased one at a time straight Shaker chairs and seats that were approximately 17" high. A large percentage of the early chairs are lower than that so that we were selective. The exceptions are the one and two slat chairs that the made expressly for use in the dining rooms where they could be pushed under the table to facilitate cleaning of the floor. None of this type of early dining chairs were available to us. However, Bro. Wm Perkins made a limited number of similar dining chairs with two horizontal rungs instead of slats and rounded acorn finials. ~~rungs in the back instead of slats. One of these was finished for use as a "telephone" chair.~~

These chairs and contemporary stools were made by Bro. William and Sister Lillian in about 1926 and we purchased one low back chair and a stool in which had the Shakers decalcomanias. Mrs. Belfit installed the tape (listing) seats.

At this time-about 1925-chairs and boxes were being made by the score at the Second Family. The taped seats were put in by Eldress Sarah Collins at the South Family. The four workers were Brother William Perkins, Sisters Lillian Barlow, Sister Emeline(?) and Brother Curtis. They were filling orders from other Shaker Communities as well as direct sales to furniture stores and individuals as distant as South Africa.

The thin sides of the Boxes were boiled and steamed for hours so that they would maintain their oval shape for decades. Sister Lillian emphasized that when the side was glued to the base, the fit was so exact that the box would stay together without the copper brads. They used hot animal glue and applied it sparingly. ~~Before applying the copper brads, fine holes were made using a hand drill press.~~

In the glueing operation the fingers were held tightly by clamps—made by Brother Perkins—very similar to our present day, mass produced, spring type clothes pins. He may have been the inventor of that type of clamp.

Brother William Perkins had his training in England. On the back of his business card is recorded: pattern making, model making, turning, polishing, cabinet making, wood carving, band sawing, antique restoration and all fine woodwork. See Plate # Referring to "antique restoration," they received for repair at times chairs, similar to the three slat back Shaker chairs but with vertical round rungs instead of the slats. Sister Lillian and Brother William always said that those chairs had not been Shaker made but were built by imitators. Although museums and books indicate that

such chairs were made by the Shakers, we disagree and view them as varying copies made by imitators—not by Shakers. The spindles nullify the great advantage to a Shaker house as they cannot be easily hung on pegs while cleaning.

It was because of such outside imitators that the Shakers started to apply the decal[c]omanias to definitely identify their chairs. The use of this label started at about the time of the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876, where the Shakers exhibited and received several awards. This method of exact identification is credited to Robert Wagan, who expanded the production of Shaker Chairs and Boxes at the Second Family and the South Family at Mt. Lebanon.

When the Second Family Shakers, Bro. William Perkins and Sister Lillian Barlow were constructing the chairs, they would be sent to Eldress Sarah Collins at the South Family for the finishing and seating. If the chair was to be “mahoganized” or “ebonized” it was dipped into a vat of dye * They would then be finished with three or four coats of orange shellac, rubbing with 0000 paper after each coat. The final finish was with 7 ought, fast cutting paper. The seats were woven ~~with bought tape~~ usually in the checkerboard pattern with bought tape using two different colors. At this time the tape was cotton and the colors were not fast. Several years later, when Eldress Sarah was nearly 90, Sister Lillian assumed also the finishing and the weaving of the tape, “listing” in the chairs. She was not satisfied with the degree of permanency of the available dyes for cotton. at her request we suggested the Du Pont Co. as a prime manufacturer of dyes and furnished her with the address of their New York City office ~~which we obtained for her~~. Sister Lillian Barlow made a special trip to New York for consultation. The representative was cooperative, so that she obtained more permanent dyes for coloring the natural color tape that she had previously purchased.

When Eldress Sarah Collins was finishing chairs at the South Family, Mt. Lebanon, Elder Walter Shepard was also there but ~~to~~ because of advanced age, he was no longer active. He had been an Elder at Enfield, Conn. before that society closed in 1904(?).

The view from Eldress Sarah’s second floor room was truly a magnificent panorama of the Lebanon Valley and Ber[k]shire Hills. Her workshop was connected by a suspension-like bridge at the second floor level. See plate #1 Eldress Sarah enjoyed our apprehension as we crossed that wavering bridge on the way to her work-room. While she tried to

assure us of its safety with “the Shakers built it so it will last forever,” we were still glad to get to the end.



A view of South Family buildings at Mount Lebanon, New York, showing Sister Sarah Collins's bridge. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

When chair finishing and taping became too arduous for Eldress Sarah, she moved up to the Second Family where Sister Lillian Barlow could attend to her needs. Although 90, we remember seeing Eldress Sarah at the 2nd Family braiding an oval rug that was approximately 10 feet in diameter.

The 2nd Family dwelling house (torn down by the purchasers) had five floors. The stair rails were made of cherry with the simple, proportional Shaker design. And after being polished by the “hands of time” they were works of art. Where are they now?

Brother William Perkins had built a small “greenhouse” addition in which sister Lillian Barlow raised from seeds her flowers and vegetables. She was the first one, that I knew, who treated her seed corn with tar to discourage the birds from stealing it. Her Marglobe tomatoes were extremely healthy plants so I bought my plants from her for several years. She potted them in large tin cans (multiple use). All of the Shakers that we knew had “green thumbs” and enjoyed the growing of flowers and vegetables. There was no longer a prohibition regarding the use of flowers.

Bro. Curtis had chickens so that they had plenty of eggs and fertilizer.

Sister Lillian had come to the Shakers when a small girl in about 1890. She said that she remembered vividly her first day at the Second Family. She rode with the Elder and Eldress from the station after they had just sent 10,000.00 to the Enfield, Conn. Shakers in payment for a like amount that had been borrowed from them to meet a crisis. Sometime previously a brother of German birth had become disgruntled and had mixed up some seeds. The loss to the purchasers of the mixed Shaker seeds had amounted to 10 thousand dollars. So, of course, the Shakers rectified the situation as equitably as possible.

As a girl Sister Lillian (now a Deaconess) used to attend the Sunday meeting conducted by Elder Frederic Evans of the North Family. He was noted as an eloquent preacher but not for brevity and Sister Lillian recollected a tired back from long [content runs off page] while sitting on backless benches.

When Sister Lillian was getting ready to move to the North Family after the sale of the Second Family, she had accumulated a basket—about 4 ft. in diameter—full of letters to Sister Clarissa Jacobs who had run a Shaker Cloak business. These letters were dated between 1880 and 1900.

The letters all expressed satisfaction with the cloak that they had bought. The writers were all persons of prominence in the literary, art, industrial, or scientific world. We will quote a letter from Mrs. Madame Duse (??)

Sections of letters regarding cloaks.

Another choice note was written to Clarissa Jacobs when she was a little girl who had been naughty but was penitent. Because of Sister [blank] Rice's exquisite handwriting and Shaker forgiveness, we are reproducing the note. See #

After Sister Lillian Barlow and Bro. Curtiss moved up to the North Family, I found two large sized one dollar bills in one of Sister Clarissa's envelopes. We then gave Sister Lillian two new bills for them. She ~~was~~ reluctantly accepted the new bills, as she said they were scheduled to be burned up. So, before we left Sister Lillian insisted that we take home a dozen eggs. Why didn't we save all of those letters.

The removal and installation of the machinery for making chairs, etc. became an expensive and tiring task, costing almost as much as the Shakers received by the sale of the Second Family property. Before Sister Lillian could operate at the new location, she became ill and died. She was

therefore, the last Shaker chair maker. This was 1940?

Watervliet

With Ted Andrews we had one very pleasant visit at the Watervliet Colony where we met Eldress Anna Case, (see picture) When she died a few years later, the New York Times carried an appreciative obituary of praise for her.

At Watervliet we learned that their revered Ann Lee was buried in their well kept cemetery and that the Albany Air Field had previously been Shaker Land, as well as the Home for the Elderly.

Besides Eldress Anna Case, we also met Sisters Mary and Grace Dahm who were blood sisters, and whom we later got to know very personally when they moved to the North Family, Mt. Lebanon, upon the closing of Watervliet following the passing of their Eldress, Anna Case.

Plate # Picture of Anna Case taken during that visit. Picture of Sister Grace Dahm at her Watervliet loom.

Plate # Step Stool Watervliet

“ # Round Shaker box, Watervliet

Diameter of Box

5 fingers on base.

Whenever, we wanted a relief from the turmoil of our “worldly” civilization we visited our relatives and friends in Pittsfield and then on to Mt. Lebanon and after they closed our visits continued at Hancock.

While our first friends were at the Second Family with Deaconess Lillian Barlow and Brother William Perkins, we soon met and enjoyed the friendships of Eldress Sarah Collins of the South Family; Eldress A. Rosetta Stephens, Eldress Ella Winship (formerly at Groveland and Watervliet, N.Y.) and Sister Jennie Wells (formerly at Groveland and Watervliet, N.Y.), Martha Wetherill (formerly at Harvard, Mass.) all at the North Family; and Eldress Emma Neale and Sister Sadie Neale of the Church Family.

The Neale sisters had previously conducted a thriving Shaker Cloak business. At this time they were no longer weaving the cloth for the cloaks and were having some difficulty in obtaining satisfactory cloth. So, we mentioned the Consumer's Union which was evalu[a]ting materials. Being interested in progress and quality ~~they were interested in progress~~, the Neale sister immediately wanted their address.

During another visit, Mrs. B. bought a silk scarve from Sister Sadie Neal, when the Sister promptly turned to Mr. B. and said, “I'll give you

one.” This is now one of our choice remembrances. Then, she showed us some bookmarks (see plate)



The pink silk kerchief, made at a Kentucky Shaker community, purchased by the Belfits. Sold by Willis Henry Auctions, October 12, 2015, lot 221. Photo courtesy of Willis Henry Auctions.

Contrary to published statements, these silk bookmarks were not woven by the Shakers. Sister Sadie Neale said that they had them woven in Lyons, France. They did not want the advertizing that was incorporated so that they had never sold them. With that explanation she was willing to sell us several of the bookmarks that were woven in many colors. (name colors)

When the Shakers sold the Church Family property to the Lebanon School for boys, the office and dwelling of the Neal sisters was to remain their living quarters for as long as they lived. We understood that they employed a Mr. Roberts to make some boxes. We have never classified those boxes as truly Shaker as they were not made by one living the communal Shaker life.

We witnessed an interesting discussion one day at the Church Family house where we had gone with Sister Martha Wetherill of the North Family. Sister Martha told Sister Sadie Neale that last Sunday Mrs. Owen

Young wanted to buy thirty boxes and you wouldn't even see her. To which, Sister Sadie said you ought to know that I do not do business on Sunday and furthermore, that I haven't that many boxes for Mrs. Young or anyone else. Martha (who was 82) was then told emphatically that when she was older she would possibly comprehend.

At another visit Mrs. B. purchased a sister kerchief, made of Kentucky Shaker silk, Sister Sadie Neale turned abruptly to Mr. B and said, "I give you one."

Eldress A. Rosetta Stephens, North Family, Mt. Lebanon became an especially close friend. She was born in England and brought to the Shakers by Elder Frederic Evans when she was 6 years old. She had lived for over 70 years at Mt. Lebanon and similar to the Neale sisters who were at the Church Family, had known a thriving community.

Eldress Rosetta was a very modest, quiet, intellectual who did not stress the fact that she was the Eldress. However, when she had her 80th birthday, she remarked "I think that I now deserve respect."

Rosetta was an accomplished musician who had written many Shaker songs. She gave us a 1893 Shaker Hymnal in which she had placed her initials "A.R.S." above each song that she had composed. There was a total of [blank].

List of titles in the appendix.

Picture No. shows the desk of Giles Avery. It was made by himself and is mostly constructed of maple. This desk was for sale at that time for a very reasonable price but we considered it to be too large for use in our house. We didn't purchase anything for accumulation or resale but only for our own needs or those of our three children.

In a letter to us under date of March, 30, 1942 from Eldress A. Rosetta Stephens, she mentions the passing of Sister Lillian Barlow, quoting: "It is indeed a sad time for us, and our trouble would seem unbearable if we did not consider the agony that is spread over the whole world at this time." (World War II). Later in that same letter, "And here is something more pleasant. We have been tapping the maple trees, have had a fine yield of sap, and so we reason, life still goes on despite reverses, and the sap still rises."

During the trying period of World War II, when we had two boys in the service—one in India—we would conserve our gasoline for a visit to Eldress Rosetta and Sister Lillian Barlow where serenity was supreme. They were relaxing times.

The North Family maintained a store in the building north of their five story dwelling house, where they sold to the public newly made boxes, handiwork etc.

Martha Wetherill was at this time in charge of the store and practically every day—except Sundays—carried over some hand made articles in a large carrier Plate #1. Later when the store was no longer kept open and she had no longer that use of the carrier, she sold it to us. It is one of Mrs. very useful boxes. Martha had been a sister at the Harvard, Mass. Shakers and when they closed that community, she brought with her what she called her antique collection which was kept in a locked room in the laundry house. Late, one afternoon she said to us, “You must see my antiques, do you want to go now?” We replied that it was late but that we would like to see them on our next visit. But, before our next trip, Sister Martha died suddenly. So, we never saw her “Harvard Antiques” but from her descriptions they consisted of a valuable collection of American glass, pewter etc. as well as Shaker artifacts. They came under the control of Sister [blank—presumably Frances Hall] a Trustee of Hancock. We were never privileged to see the collection and do not know how they were disposed.



Comb rack
purchased by
the Belfits from
the Hancock,
Massachusetts,
Shaker community.
Photo courtesy of
Lynn Crabtree.

After the death of [blank—presumably Frances Hall] who lived in a separate house, alone, at Hancock, we purchased out of that house a curly maple framed mirror 8” x 12”? and a comb rack, see plate #. Both are e[x]quisite illustrations of perfect Shaker craftsmanship. The rack is made of butternut. The workmanship is so superb that an antique cabinmaker

said “It is a privilege just to hold it.” It is probable that both the mirror and comb rack were made by one of the fine cabin[et]makers in the Harvard Society. Incidentally, Sears saved many of the splendid artifacts and furniture made at Harvard in the Shaker House that was moved to Fruitlands at Harvard, Mass. Mrs Sears book, [blank], published in 19 reveals an early recognition by her of the desirability to preserve the many virtues of the Shakers.



Shaker cupboard made at Harvard, Massachusetts, as used in the Belfits' home.
Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

The mention of the Harvard Shakers reminds us that our most outstanding piece of Shaker furniture is the glass top cupboard which has eight panes of glass in each of two doors that are above a 7 inch ??? shelf, below which are six graduated drawers in two tiers. Illustrating the Shaker desire for perfection in detail, each pane of glass was made so that the partitions were directly in lack???? of separating molding. The economical use of wood is noticeable as one observes that the ledge is only one quarter of an inch. All wood is pine with a yellowish wash of shellac. While the Shakers-as a rule- did not sign their work, this cupboard has written in pencil the following:

On the separating board below the left bottom drawer:

“The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom. 1836 G.W. Harvard, Mass.”

On the bottom of the right top drawer is written in pencil:

“My time and talents great and small/ Henceforth devoted here/ In grateful praises for my call/ to live in purity” “January 1836”

This cupboard shatters the assertions that the Shakers never used glass. They used every construction material that was available and in their opinion best suited for the particular purpose. Except for chairs, boxes, seeds and textile handiwork, their furniture was made for themselves to furnish their living room, dining rooms and storage rooms. This glass cupboard occupies the most important corner of our living room where it functions in a way that we believe the Shakers would use it. The upper four shelves are full with glass and china of the 19th century- perhaps more crowded than the Shakers would have them.

See plate #

The five storied North Family dwelling house, Mt. Lebanon was the home of the last Shakers in that colony. It was wear Frederic Evans lived from . He was born in England, became a very devout Shaker, personally a vegetarian, an orator, editor of the Shaker Manifesto, prolific writer on controversial subject, an unflinching peace activist and anti-war advocate, and a Shaker who went twice back to England to obtain converts.

In one of Bro. Frederic’s trips he brought from England, a small girl whose mother had died. She grew up to be our good friend Eldress A. Rosetta Stephens, who was always happy and pleased that circumstances directed her to the Shakers.

In acquiring furniture from the Shakers, we never tried to buy anything that they were using. When members died, furniture sometimes became

available. Eldress Rosetta had a quaint and useful sewing desk, which we admired, And one day she said, "I can get another one, would you like to buy it." So, we were happy to acquire it. See Plate #

We have a tall son, over six feet, and when inquiring about the possibility of purchasing a Shaker bed, Eldress said we have the bed that was made especially for Elder Frederic Evans, who also was over six feet, "would you like to buy that one?" Of course, we were glad of the opportunity to own Elder Evans own bed. Plate #



Sister Ethel May Peacock (1889-1975) and Hazel Belfit on the steps of the 1794 meetinghouse, Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Sister Ethel ran a museum and sold items out of the meetinghouse, which was not reopened for public meeting until 1963. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.



Rebecca Hathaway (1872-1958) in the Syrup Shop (1797) at Canterbury. This shop had been where the famous Syrup of Sarsaparilla was made. In 1919 it was converted to a canning kitchen where Hathaway was in charge of canning for almost fifty years. Photo courtesy of Lynn Crabtree.

Letters from Shakers to the Belfits

New Lebanon, N.Y.

Nov. 8th 1938

Mrs Belfit,
My dear Friend,

Your note received and would say the little cupboard is all tied up with a night-cap on, and the door and hinges secured waiting to be delivered. I hope the bureau, that I know you like so much arrived in a good condition. The man called rather late in the evening for us country folk, and we are calling it the "Great Adventure," will tell you more later.

I am sending the price of the cupboard, also the price of the Shaker cloth pr. yd. in case you decide to want it.

Come and see us and take lunch with us, we like to have you.
With best of wishes to each one
I remain,
Most sincerely,
A.R. Stephens

Cupboard— \$7.00
Skie[?] blue— \$3.00 per. yd.
Pressed blue— 2.00 “ “
Red cloth— 1.50 “ “

P.S. Please thank Mr. Belfit for pictures, I like them ever so much.
A.R.S. [Annie Rosetta Stephens]

New Lebanon, N.Y.
Dec. 5th 1938

Mr and Mrs Belfit,
My dear Friends,

I hope I may be forgiving for not answering your kind and friendly letter before this, but we have been in such confusion on account of the moving, that we hardly knew where we stood. Much to our satisfaction we are now quite put to rights and restored to our former Shaker orderliness.

I suppose it is the same with you, but winter came upon us with such severity we thought we were snowed in for the winter, but the fates are good again, and Sunday was a perfectly charming day, and I am wondering if you could make it possible to call on us before the Christmas season?

I am reserving the ironing table and cupboard, some things have been disposed of, we regret that so many pieces are too large for a private family. But there is still something to choose from.

With best wishes for each and all in your little family,
Most sincerely,
A. Rosetta Stephens

Price of Ironing Table \$5.00

New Lebanon, N.Y.

Oct. 30th 1942

My dear Friends,

So nice to hear from you; only the other day I was cogitating to myself, and saying, I hope our Watertown friends will be able to save up some gas and pay us a visit before Christmas. Am I not bold? But then we like our friends.

In regard to the dolls, Str. Jennie tells me she is very willing to dress them, man and maid for your dear little girl.

Your daughter looks very beautiful and I am wishing her great happiness.

Thank you for the \$10.00 deposit on the bedstead, I am holding it in reserve for a tall boy, but a tall man was asking for it the past summer, but I said, *No!!*

We have had great turn ups recently. We have cleared out the rooms across the hall from my room, and Str. Sarah is comfortably situated in two rooms, and still making rugs. She seems much happier.

We are clearing up the Sec. House, cutting off water and steam, we've got to save like other folks.

We have had great difficulty in getting the farm work done, but we manage somehow to get the crops in, and they are more than we expected.

The Autumn coloring was perfectly magnificent this Fall. Two young ladies two weeks ago came to paint the beauty. They were from the Albany Teachers College.

The flower garden across the road is still beautiful but we only have a few brave petunias left in the door-yard.

Kindly remember me to Mother when you see her and come and see us before we are snowed in and snowed under. The sisters all are well and send their love to you.

With kindest wishes, Your loving friend

Rosetta [Stephens]

East Canterbury, N.H.

Dec. 4, 1952

Dear Mrs. Belfit,

The sisters are sending you the kind of poplar box they think you want. The \$3.50 box is a sewing box and at the present they only have it in pink. If however that is what you prefer, feel free to return the ones send.

The chickadees and the nuthatches are my constant companions. If I do not keep enough out for them they sit on the vine and scold me. I love them.

I can almost see you, dusting to the rhythm of your Christmas verses.

Sincerely,

Marguerite Frost

RFD1—Box 8

Pittsfield, Mass

March 28—1953

My dear Friend.

I received your Check for \$35.00 in payment for the Cupboard you wished to buy.

I most certainly will hold it for you to be called for at your convenience.

I am glad you are to have it as I know it will be in good hands.

It was made sometime in the late 1860's so it will not be long now before it becomes an Antique.

I am most sincerely yours

Sister Jennie M. Wells.

August 13, 1959.

Dear Mr. Belfit,

Yesterday afternoon, Wed., the 12th, Mr. Coupal started for Hancock with the furniture, chest and little bench. He will leave them in the care of Sister Mary, and I am sure they will reach there in nice condition.

Glad you enjoyed your stay at Ogunquit.

We are still busy with tourists. Over 130 registered in our guestbook, yesterday. Next year we do not expect to do to the tours, and the news is already spread abroad, so more are hurrying to our doors.

Much love and wishes for good health and happiness for our good friends

Hazel and Robert,

Sincerely,

Aida M. Elam

The Shaker Quarterly
Sabbathday Lake
Poland Spring, Maine [letterhead]
Oct 30, 1961

Dear Mr. Belfit:—

Thank you for your letter and check. I am sending the spirit drawing to you along with this letter. I am glad I had it to offer to you. I wonder why they have discontinued that particular one?

Hope you will have received your Quarterly by the time this arrives. Be sure and let me know how you like it. I am not as satisfied with the first issue but I suppose that is the way with any publication. At least, it is out and they are now working on the Fall one, or supposed to be working on it. I certainly hope this is true.

Glad to know Mrs. B. is improving and hope she will continue. It always takes some time to get a bone back into full use I guess. It was too bad that it had to happen especially on a trip home from Maine. Now please don't hesitate to come again will you.

About the Seminars. Perhaps you heard that they gave them last year. These were a repetition of the same with some editing. Sister Marguerite's was ~~The Shaker~~ Religious Concept of the Shakers. It was very nice indeed and very well done. She deserved much credit for in her condition it took a lot of courage I thought. Sister Lillian's was on music, Sr. Aida's History Bertha's Industries and Miriam's Entertainment and school. They plan to have them printed in pamphlet form in the near future. I will try and let you know when and if they are available.

I am glad you find MacLean's bibliography instructive. We use ours all the time for reference. We do have Elder Evans book in a bound copy but

not in original form. If you ever feel that you wish to let us have it I would be happy to buy it. I feel rather grasping to take so much from you without paying for it. Ted says the unbound are more valuable in some books. I haven't talked with him about this one. I shall write him at once and tell him about Mr. Gardiner's exhibit in Boston. He will surely want to look it over at least. I miss having him here every week as we always had so much to talk about and accomplish.

Bro. Delmer seems to keep about the same though I feel he is much less strong. He looks very thin and pale though he keeps on planning to get well and out again. I am glad he is of that mind for that will be the only thing that will give him any strength, if he is to have it.

Please remember me to Mrs. Belfit and tell her that we shall be happy to hear from her when she is able to write but to not hurry about it. Let her wrist heal.

My best to you both— Sister Mildred [Barker]